

'Social media on trial': using technology to enhance inter-disciplinarity and practice experience in Higher Education

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‘Social media on Trial’: Using technology to enhance inter-disciplinarity and practice experience in Higher Education.

Teaching with Technology

In his highly accessible book on teaching with technology, Steve Wheeler counsels against a common pedagogical mistake:

Simply applying technology because it’s new and shiny, or because ‘everyone else is doing it’, is always a mistake (Wheeler, 2015).

However, despite Wheeler’s caveat, Higher Education Lecturers like myself are increasingly faced with institutional pressures to use new and emerging technologies with students who often have more digital expertise than we do, coupled with intense workloads which may not allow time for sorties into technological experimentation. Bridging the gap between these competing demands is often a Technology Enhanced Learning team whose brief may also be bewildering for Lecturers without the time or expertise to integrate technology into teaching. At my own Institution, the Technology Enhanced Learning Team offers an annual Innovation Award Scheme which invites educators to collaborate with the TEL team on delivering projects involving creative use of technologies.

In 2015 I was fortunate to be awarded a Technology Enhanced Learning Award for a project called ‘Making the Right Connections’ which utilised a range of technological methods to explore the ethical complexities of social work and other professional practice within a rapidly expanding digital landscape. As a Social Work Lecturer, I am particularly interested in the ethical dilemmas that face a highly regulated profession, with a ‘protected title’ and strict ethical and confidentiality codes in a brave, new and digitally mediated world. The project therefore involved a number of different workshops and events, including an animation workshop culminating in a short film; a podcasting workshop and a seminar in which a local barrister discussed the implications of Courts becoming ‘paperless.’ This has significant repercussions for social workers who will need to transfer often very sensitive data electronically to Courts, as well as understanding the ways in which evidence is now drawn from social media profiles and other online platforms. Following the success of these events and as a suitable finale for the project I collaborated with the Department of Law; the Department of Media, Film and Music and Technology Enhanced Learning to design and deliver a live Court simulation. The event was also supported by a local Barrister’s Chambers who worked with all the students to prepare their cases and supported them on the night, as social networking itself was charged with:

Being a conduit for the dissemination of hostile and offensive material; presenting a danger to the public good and collective wellbeing of society.

Technology Enhanced learning comes to Court

As befitting a Technology Enhanced Learning Innovation project, the 'Social media on Trial' event utilised technology in multiple ways, helping to break down barriers and showcase the efficacy of different platforms and applications, as Sally Burr my Departmental Learning Technologist and colleague explains:

The Technology Enhanced Learning team were thrilled to support such an exciting event, it really captured the imagination. We broadcast the event live via the Periscope app as this allowed for extending the event outside of the immediate Court room. We had over 130 external viewers on Periscope, many of them commented and indicated their approval by using the Periscope icon. For the electronic 'Jury' vote we used Poll Everywhere. This is a voting app which can be used to gather information from the audience. We created a poll based on the statement and then allowed the audience to vote A (Guilty) or B (Not guilty). The Poll collects data in real time with participants able to respond via texting via their mobile phone or using a web browser. It was a great tool to use as it was exciting to see the poll whizz up and down before your eyes as the votes came in.

Gaining confidence in Court

On the evening of the mock trial, as social media was faced with the charge, four students from Social Work acted as witnesses for the defence and prosecution with their statements undergoing cross examination from student Law advocates. Prior to the statements and cross examination, a preliminary vote tested the opinions of those watching and the verdict was a resounding guilty. A live audience, with standing room only in the 'Court' then watched the students present their cases and face cross examination, whilst, as Sally states, 130 online viewers watched on Periscope. Finally, both the electronic 'Jury' of online and real world audience were invited to cast a definitive vote on the charge which delivered a shock verdict of not guilty.

Public engagement with the barristers Chambers assisted the students with speaking in this highly charged atmosphere, thereby building their confidence, as well as enhancing their career prospects and skills development. Court can be a very daunting environment for social workers as Gema, a newly qualified practitioner, who assisted with the 'on trial' event, describes:

I remember my first experience of being in a Court setting as a student and just seeing how the room looked was not only overwhelming but also so different than I had imagined.

In addition to experiences like Gema's which are common, as digitisation becomes endemic, Courts are placing new demands on social workers to understand the ethical complexities of interacting with electronic data. Much of the new regulatory framework for social workers emphasises this need to become confident and competent around matters of e-professionalism and the 'Social Media on Trial' event assisted with this, as evidenced by many online commentators who commented on the skill and confidence of all the students involved. Alison, one of the students for the defence shows clearly how she benefited from the event:

I had never been in a court setting before so didn't know what to expect. Reading out the witness statement did not worry me but the idea of being cross-examined filled me with fear. I was worried I would not know how to respond, be unable to hold my own against experienced lawyers and freeze in front of a room full of people. In fact I found the opposite. I stood in the witness box feeling nervous and apprehensive as I read out my statement but by the time I was cross-examined not only did I feel relaxed but I had started to enjoy myself. .. When I consider what social workers are trained to do, this is not surprising. Everyday my work involves analysing situations, applying rational thinking and making informed judgements - the exact same process was involved in the witness box. This experience taught me not to fear court but to use the skills and knowledge I have to embrace it. As part of their role, social workers need to identify risks in situations, gaps in a person's story and are challenged for decisions they make. I learnt that as a social worker I am not just very capable of being in court but am in fact trained to go through the very same process every single day

Inter-Disciplinary Working

Another strength of the approach taken in staging the 'Social media on Trial' event was the inter-disciplinarity, which also echoes the encounters students will have in practice. The Law and Social Work students all worked closely with the Barristers and the Head of Chambers acted as a resident 'Judge' for the evening itself. The role of Court Reporters was taken by students from the Department of Journalism who recorded the shock verdict of the night as the Defence won their case with an overwhelming majority.

Rich, a student on the 'prosecution side describes the benefit of this inter-disciplinarity for his future practice:

It was enjoyable to do a bit of inter-agency style working, considering issues from a different perspective. Multi-agency working will be something we have to contend with, and I think sometimes the social work perspective can carry less weight than other professions that maybe have a bit more credibility/ standing for whatever reason (though that wasn't my experience in this instance).

Becky, who was involved with the winning defence team, endorses what both Rich and Alison say, pointing also to the way in which people's perceptions of social workers may have been challenged by their skill and poise under cross examination:

I would probably say that the court always seemed like this really big scary element of social work that we kind of ignore until we are faced with having to experience it in practice, so being involved in this was really helpful.... I also would say that watching my colleagues give their witness statements and perform so well under pressure during cross examination has given me faith in the future of social work that I will be a part of. I think a lot of the audience members were very surprised by how well-informed, confident and competent

the social work students were and it was great to be involved in something that has challenged people's perceptions of social workers too!

Becky's observation is endorsed by Richard; the Head of the Chambers who acted as Judge for the evening and who also demonstrates the benefit of the inter-disciplinary approach taken throughout:

I was incredibly impressed by the standard of questioning, and equally by the answers that were given. It was a great opportunity for us, as practitioners, to participate in a meaningful debate (often legal moots can be rather arid). I think that this worked on a range of levels; as a cross-disciplinary event, as an academic-practitioner interaction, and as a chance for students to engage in the processes that will in due course form part of their working life.

Finally, Georgia one of the three Court Reporters from the Dept. of Journalism also validates the efficacy of the event for upskilling students for the 'real world':

I went to the Social Media on Trial event as one of three court reporters and was incredibly impressed by the standard of professionalism and knowledge of both the law and social work students. It was insightful to see social work students engage in lively debate and comprehensively answer the questions fired at them by both the 'resident judge' and the law students. Legal professionals and social workers interact on a daily basis in the real world so this seemed to be a useful exercise for all of those involved.

The massive swing in opinion from guilty at the outset to not guilty is testament to the knowledge that the social workers had about social media as a platform.

Beyond the new and shiny

Whilst digital technologies are commonly criticised for forcing people apart (Turtle, 2011) the Social Media on Trial event rebutted this, forging inter-disciplinary links and showcasing technology as a genuinely useful and participative learning tool. The barristers Chambers were so impressed by the students involved that they have offered a form of Law apprenticeship to ten students on an annual basis, thereby creating entirely new career enhancement opportunities.

Technology Enhanced Learning at Sussex are creating a website to encourage emulation of this event, which will now run on a yearly basis, thereby delivering the innovation, career prospects, public engagement and inter-disciplinarity which higher education requires in a competitive landscape.

To conclude with a return to Wheeler's caveat about using technology, the Social Media on Trial format went beyond the 'new' and 'shiny' to actively demonstrate the value of embedding technology in purposeful way which overcame technological fears and created new opportunities. Encouraging people to join in

via Periscope and vote via Poll Everywhere engaged them in a purposeful use of digital applications which brought them together into a community for that evening. The 'shock verdict' which differed so strongly from the earlier vote is, I believe, testament to this and showcases the value of this model for further educational development.

Turkle, S (2011) *Alone Together*, Basic Books, NY

References: Wheeler, S (2015) *Learning with 'e's: Educational theory & practice in a digital age*. Crown House Publishing, Caernarvon.

Further notes:

Technology Enhanced Learning and the Dept. of Social Work at Sussex have produced an online 'toolkit' for those wishing to emulate this type of event. The live broadcast and comments can be viewed on Twitter under the hashtag #smot. There is also a Podcast describing the background to the event: <https://soundcloud.com/user-649411246/social-media-on-trial>

Padlet link for outputs from 'Making the Right Connections' a Technology Enhanced Learning Award Innovation project in the Dept. of Social Work and Social Care, University of Sussex: <https://padlet.com/DeniseT01/4xqhgykzzqw6>

*For the 'Defence': Alison Wheeler; Claire Sherman; Becky Lyons
For the 'Prosecution': Andrew Haughton; Richard Reid; Gema Hadridge**

'Resident Judge': Richard Barton, Head of Westgate Chambers, Lewes.

Learning technologist: Sally Burr

**Defence and Prosecution positions do not represent the actual views of the students/practitioners involved.*

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